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ABSTRACT

Students' willingness to befriend a mentally retarded student was investigated using written vignettes about students said to be enrolling in the subjects' school. The study population included 60 fourth grade students from 5 social studies classes in a small southern community. Students were randomly assigned to experimental or control conditions. Groups of 8 to 12 students were taken to a separate classroom and asked to read written descriptions of 2 boys and 2 girls who were said to be enrolling in the school. In the control condition, all of the stories described the incoming students as being nonlabeled, normal peers. In the experimental condition, the descriptions of two of the new classmates were modified to include the addition of the mentally retarded label. Subjects were asked to make a behavioral commitment to befriend one of the incoming students under the assumption that the child would be joining their class. Chi square analysis indicated that the addition of the mentally retarded label to a description of a child significantly reduced the frequency of that child being chosen by subjects as a potential friend. The data suggested that a mentally retarded label may be a significant inhibitor to regular education students' willingness to accept labeled peers. (Author/AC)

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Social Acceptance of Mentally Retarded Children by Nonlabeled Peers

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Abstract

Students' willingness to befriend a mentally retarded student was investigated using written vignettes of students said to be enrolling in the subjects' school. In the control condition, all stories described the incoming students as being nonlabeled, normal peers. In the experimental condition, half of the descriptions of new classmates were modified to include the addition of the mentally retarded label. Subjects were asked to make a behavioral commitment to befriend one of the incoming students under the assumption that the child would be joining their class. Chi square analysis indicated that the addition of the mentally retarded label to a description of a child significantly reduced the frequency of that child being chosen by subjects as a potential friend. Consequently, the data suggested that a mentally retarded label may be a significant inhibitor to regular education students' willingness to socially accept labeled peers.

Social Acceptance of Mentally Retarded Children by Nonlabeled Peers

The educational label of mentally retarded (MR) or mentally handicapped (MH) has been used to classify students for the provision of special services. Students so classified display below average ability and concomitant deficits in adaptive behavior (Hallahan & Kauffman, 1982). Unfortunately, apart from their programming implications, labels may take on negative connotations and alter society's perceptions of the children involved (MacMillan, Jones, & Aloia, 1974; Whalen, Henker, Dotemoto, & Henshaw, 1983). If a child is labeled as MR, the expectation for that child's performance may be lowered and attributed to lack of ability rather than lack of effort. Consequently, the label may draw attention to the individual's deficits rather than strengths (Palmer, 1983; Yeates & Weisz, 1985). Indeed, labeling can affect teachers' and others' global estimations of behavior (Fogel & Nelson, 1983).

While the issue of labeling alone is an important one, it takes on added significance considering the movement to more fully include students with disabilities in regular education activities (Reynolds, 1989; Reynolds, Wang, & Walberg, 1987). This initiative, in it varied forms, seeks to integrate those students who have received more segregated services under 94-142 and essentially establishes regular education settings as those most appropriate for educational growth. Students who display disabilities would then be aided within the regular education setting insofar as their needs require (Blackman, 1992; Schattman & Benay, 1992). Since the consequences of the labeling process (i.e., negative attributions) might impede the labeled child's acceptance by nonlabeled peers on terms of social as well as academic behavior, it will be important to understand how the perceptions of classified children could threaten their adaptation to the regular education environment (Hemphill & Siperstein, 1990; Milich, McAninch, & Harris, 1992; Siperstein, Budoff, & Bak, 1980).

Information is still relatively sparse as to the perceived acceptability of MR students into regular education classrooms. Apart from the children's purported cognitive delays, MR students may display social skill deficits. Gresham (1982) argued that the success of mainstreaming students depended upon their social adaptability and stressed that social skills training would positively affect MR acceptance in the classroom. Hemphill and Siperstein (1990) pointed to conversational competence as a key component to social acceptance. Siperstein and Bak (1985) and Bak and Siperstein (1986) reported that the expectancy of prosocial attributes in MR students did have a positive effect on nonlabeled children's attitudes and intentions towards MR students but only insofar as joint student activities involved academic rather than nonacademic(social) type tasks. Unfortunately, even when children were not formally classified but received resource or special classroom services, the defacto label evoked differential expectations for cognitive performance on the part of nonlabeled children (Bak, Cooper, Dobroth, & Siperstein, 1987).

Previous research has suggested that the perception of a difference between the nonlabeled child and one either labeled or receiving special services appears to affect expectations and attitudes. This conclusion is clouded by the fact that studies addressing this question have typically assessed student perceptions of the retarded through surveys and/or questionnaires that pose involvement with target MR children at a nonpersonal level. Therefore, it has been difficult to control for subject personality and behavioral history as well as the desire of students to provide a socially acceptable response. In addition, subject responses often have offered no behavioral risk of actual interaction with a retarded individual. One study that did provide the potential for actual partnership between retarded and nonretarded students in a game situation found that retarded children who showed competence equal to their normal peers were less likely to be chosen be an average child. Retarded children who excelled at the game were chosen as partners but the perception of competence did not extend to other

behavioral situations (Bak & Siperstein, 1987).

It appears, then, that reaction to MR students by nonlabeled peers may be mediated by these peers' perceptions of academic and/or social competence. In none of the research reviewed was the subject population asked to make a long term behavioral commitment to an MR child. This study attempts to explore students' willingness to make a behavioral commitment to social interactions with a MR child by using written descriptions of hypothetical children in a realistic situation. Hypothetical children were used to eliminate any personality, behavioral, or physical expectations.

Method

Subjects

Sixty fourth grade students were selected from five social studies classes in a small southern community. Parental permission for participation in the study was requested for the 150 students enrolled; 75 students were granted permission. Of those, 60 students were randomly selected to participate. Students selected were then randomly assigned to either the experimental (16 females, 14 males) or control (19 females, 11 males) condition. Sex of the subjects was not controlled. No special education students were included in the sample. Students had been exposed to special education students since learning disability and educable mentally retarded programs were housed in the school.

Procedure

Groups of eight to twelve subjects were taken to a separate classroom and asked to read written descriptions of four target children (to boys and two girls). Previously, the descriptions had been examined by four elementary teachers and judged to be typical fourth graders and of equal attractiveness in terms of description and name (for research on name attraction, see Harari & McDavid, 1973). Experimental and control groups were presented with identical descriptions except for the addition of the MR label concerning one boy and girl in

the experimental condition. The label was attached to the description using the statement: "'_____' attends a class for mentally retarded students for part of the day".

Subjects were told that the four children would be coming to their school after the Christmas break and a search was being conducted to find buddies for them. A "buddy" was defined as someone who would be responsible for the now student for three weeks. The buddy would be required to play with the child at recess, eat lunch with him/her and include him/her in the buddy's friendship group. Each subject was then asked to read each of the descriptions silently as the examiner read them aloud and then place a mark next to the name of the student for whom he/she would be a buddy. After all 60 subjects completed the procedure, they were debriefed and told that the target children were imaginary and that they would not be expected to fulfill their obligations.

Results and Discussion

The frequency with which each target child was chosen in the control and experimental conditions is listed in Table 1 and by sex of respondent in Table 2. Chi square analysis revealed that a significant difference existed between control and experimental groups ($\chi 2 = 0.56$, df = 3, $p < .05$). Addition of the mentally retarded label seemed to result in a change in the subjects' distribution of choices since all other identifying information remained constant. Reaction to the labeled target children seemed especially strong among male subjects. While the male targets had equal levels of desirability for subjects in the control condition, the males in the experimental condition uniformly selected the nonlabeled male target Females in the experimental condition tended to be more accepting of the labeled students. Nevertheless, the MR label seemed to decrease the attractiveness of those classified.

Insert Table 1 about here

These results are consistent with previous investigations which suggested that the MR

child may be impaired by the label when required to compete in social situations. According to this study, the label did seem to have inherent negative connotations for the subjects such that changes in potential interaction patterns with peers may result.

Insert Table 2 about here

This study differs from earlier research in that the subjects believed they were making a behavioral commitment to the target child. Previous studies have relied on reactive measures such as adjective checklists or attitude surveys to elicit responses regarding social acceptability. In this study, the subjects assumed that they were pledging their time to a new companion for a three week period. Under these conditions, the students seemed to prefer targets who were perceived as more like themselves and unlikely to have the additional attributes presumed to accompany the retarded label.

If these results reflect the typical fourth grader's reaction to the opportunity to interact with MR students, then the consequences of mainstreaming or inclusion may be less than positive for the MR student unless the situation is carefully supervised. Children who are perceived as "different" may have a difficult time gaining social acceptance from the group. Hemphill and Siperstein (1990) offered that conversational skill may be a salient way to gauge the acceptability of a retarded child; however, Milich et al. (1992) emphasized that the peers of integrated children will need to be included in any kind of social skills training plan. Not only must the labeled child develop competent interactional skills, but classmates must consider the positive as well as negative aspects of that individual student. Such a broad-based approach would seem especially relevant for assisting males to accept a labeled peer.

Further research in the area of reaction to perceived student differences is of great importance in light of current educational trends. If the label is removed, will continuing differences in cognitive and/or social skills deter the MR child from being accepted as a full

member of the classroom community? It would also be of consequence to determine if there is a gender effect to the integration of special education students. In light of these results, it may be more difficult for male MR students to achieve successful integration with their peers.

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Table 1

Frequency of Target Student Choice in Labeled and Nonlabeled Conditions

	Control		Experimental	
Target	Labeled	Freq. of Choice	Labeled	Freq. of Choice
John	no	20%	no	47%
Mary	no	27%	yes	13%
David	no	17%	yes	0%
Linda	no	37%	no	40%

Table 2

Frequency of Target Student Choice by Sex of Respondent in Labeled and Nonlabeled Conditions

Females

	Control		Experimental	
Target	Labeled	Freq. of Choice	Labeled	Freq. of Choice
John	no	5%	no	0%
Mary	no	42%	yes	25%
David	no	0%	yes	0%
Linda	no	53%	no	75%

Males

	Control		Experimental	
Target	Labeled	Freq. of Choice	Labeled	Freq. of Choice
John	no	45%	no	100%
Mary	no	0%	yes	0%
David	no	45%	yes	0%
Linda	no	10%	no	0%